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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the culture of writing in higher education from a multicultural perspective of those within the "monolith." The paper first notes that writing programs, more specifically writing across the curriculum (WAC), and writing centers work in similar ways by benefiting each other and sharing the broad mission of improving students' writing. It then points out the differences programs manifest in many ways, and each program has a more specific mission, explicitly stated or not. The paper does three primary things: first, it discusses the general missions of WAC programs and writing centers based on the goal of improving student writing; second, it discusses how the programs can and do coordinate; and third, it explores the structural implication of separating or combining the programs. (NKA)

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# Separating Siamese Twins: Can We Extricate WAC from Writing Centers?

by Jacob S. Blumner

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J. S. Blumner

**Blumner**
**NWCA 2000 Presentation**

**Separating Siamese Twins: Can We Extricate WAC from Writing Centers**

At the East Central Writing Center Association's 2000 conference, Joe Law gave the luncheon speech in which he used the movie Clueless, based on Jane Austin's *Emma*, as a way to talk about WAC/Writing Center relationships. He described the "culture" of and "subcultures" in the fictitious Bronson Alcott High School as a means to explore the culture of writing in higher education and the subcultures of WAC and writing centers. I'd like to address the culture of writing in higher education as Law describes it -- from a multicultural perspective of those within the "monolith."

Arguably, writing programs, and more specifically here WAC and writing centers, work in similar ways. They benefit each other and share the broad mission of improving students writing. But the different programs manifest in many ways, and each program has a more specific mission, explicitly stated or not.

In this essay, I want to do three primary things. First, I want to discuss the general missions of WAC programs and writing centers based on the goal of improving student writing. The second thing I'd like to discuss is how the programs can and do coordinate. And the third topic I want to explore is the structural implication of separating or combining the programs.

**THE GENERAL MISSIONS OF WAC PROGRAMS AND WRITING CENTERS.**

Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon, in their May 2000 *College English* article, "Clearing the Air: WAC Myths and Realities," powerfully describe WAC: "Writing to learn is not different from or in opposition to learning to write in the disciplines, nor is it superior. Writing across the curriculum includes both writing to learn and learning to write in the disciplines" (580). Discussing their article serves two purposes for this presentation. The first is to voice what most of us here already know: WAC encompasses writing to learn and learning to write, and they aren't mutually exclusive. Amen. What rightly remains unstated and understood in their article is that WAC is teacher-centered. Let me explain.

There is no question that WAC programs are designed to improve student writing – they accomplish it by working with faculty. I would like to forward that there is an elliptical T in front of the acronym WAC that stands for Teaching, but TWAC doesn't have the ring WAC does. WAC programs are for faculty. We

are all familiar with the services most WAC programs provide: workshops, seminars, libraries, and newsletters. I recently read the charge of a nationally reputable WAC program, which had three implicit learning goals for students. It had seven explicit charges for the WAC coordinator and committee. I believe this is a typical mission. WAC programs help faculty so faculty can help students.

If WAC has an elliptical T in front of it, writing centers have an elliptical S for students. Though occasionally faculty use the writing center, and some centers even serve the public, students working on assignments for class are our bread and butter. Writing centers are designed to help writers, primarily student writers. Face-to-face tutoring or consulting, OWLs, writing workshops, in-class tutorials, and writing handbooks serve writers.

Michael Pemberton, in his *Writing Center Journal* article, "Rethinking the WAC/Writing Center Connection" describes two "partial and provisional" roles in which tutors might help writers within the larger context of a college with a WAC program. The first he labels the Environmental approach, in which an "interested, disinterested other" serves as a "quasi-authoritative" source with whom students feel most comfortable. The second is the Cognitive role, in which tutors help students discover new "perspectives for thinking about their tasks." Pemberton limits his suggestions to tutorials, implicitly reinforcing the notion that writing centers are for writers. I don't want to contest that notion; I just want to make it explicit for this discussion. Writing centers are student-centered. And they should be.

We see writing centers as student-centered, and I hope we can see WAC programs as faculty-centered, with the goal of improving student writing. One focuses on writing. The other focuses on the teaching of writing. For those of us involved in these subcultures, we know that they create interesting alliances or merge to accomplish the larger mission of improving student leaning and writing. Much ink has been spilled establishing the relationships between these subcultures.

**HOW CAN AND DO WAC AND WRITING CENTER PROGRAMS COORDINATE?**

Some institutions combine writing centers and WAC, like the University of Nevada and the University of Toledo. In both cases, they report directly to the provost's office, essentially dropping the distinction between the programs. Mark Waldo, from the University of Nevada argues that the writing center

is the "last best place" for WAC because, among a number of reasons, the writing center provides "a definable space for expertise, with identifiable goals and services, which the campus will need to initiate and sustain WAC" (16).

Other institutions, like the University of Michigan—Flint and Wright State University, separate the programs, distributing the workload among staff, faculty, and/or administrators. Though the programs are separate, they work closely together to provide the best learning opportunities for students. Scott Johnston and Bruce Speck argue the relationship between separate WAC and writing center programs can be highly successful in "The Writing Center as Ambassador Plenipotentiary in a Developing WAC Program."

A third model of the WAC/writing center relationship is more troublesome. Some schools have a writing center and not a formal WAC program. Kent State University--Stark Campus is such a campus. You might not be surprised by this situation on a small campus, where faculty generally have smaller class sizes and an intimate faculty who can work informally together on improving their teaching of writing. But, Mickey Harris describes a similar situation at Purdue University in "A Writing Center Without a WAC Program: The De Facto WAC Center/Writing Center" in which her center is burdened with the role of essentially "directing" a WAC program without administrative and financial support. Writing centers are burdened with the role of being the De Facto WAC Center if a formal WAC program isn't in place. She writes, "without institutionally provided resources and institutional sanction for WAC, a Writing Center has limits beyond which it cannot go in working with students Writing Across the Curriculum and the teachers assigning that writing" (90). Ironically perhaps, McLeod and Maimon claim that a WAC program needs a writing center to thrive.

As members of one or more of these subcultures, we can see the distinctions and advantages and issues associated with each manifestation and alliance.

**THE STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF SEPARATING OR COMBINING THE PROGRAMS?**

I'd like to briefly return to the McLeod and Maimon essay. They published it in *College English* as a means to dispel the myths of WAC while forwarding its realities. They are not writing to WAC directors (though I'm sure they intended WAC directors to use the article to their advantage). They are writing to

English teachers who assume they know what WAC is. The same is true of Stephen North's landmark essay "The Idea of a Writing Center." Here again, he is not writing for Writing Center directors directly. He is writing to the larger community of English faculty.

The demographics of WAC and writing center directors is heavily skewed toward English faculty. In fact, I only know of one WAC director who does not have an English background, and I can't think of any writing center directors without one. It disturbs me, then, that the audience of those articles is English faculty. If writers like McLeod, Maimon, and North need to write articles for faculty whose own colleagues run these programs, what might those outside the discipline of English think?

My experience has been that faculty see the WAC program and writing center as a single entity. They see no distinction between the WAC program and the writing center. Let me give you a practical example. As WAC director on my campus, faculty frequently ask me about the writing center. As a strong advocate of the writing center and a close consultant to its director, I can answer nearly all of their questions. What WAC director in his right mind wouldn't provide such information? Recently, an accounting faculty member asked me if the writing center would go to her class for a writing workshop. Since our writing center provides that service, I said they would. Then she asked me what for anyone outside the subcultures of WAC and writing centers would see as the next logical step in this stereotypical conversation: Can I bring *my* tutors to her class. I have no authority over the center, can take no responsibility for its tutors, and am unable to commit the center to do many of the services it provides to faculty as WAC support, so I told her she had to talk to the writing center director or manager.

As WAC director, am I sending a mixed message? I advocate using writing in the classroom, even dedicating class time to workshops, but technically I am not associated with the center, thus I am unable to directly provide the services I advocate. Will faculty respond favorably to this situation, or view it as an additional burden of bureaucracy in what they see as a single program? By splitting these programs, we might be trying to separating the inseparable.

Conversely, schools like the University of Nevada don't have the problem of separate or De Facto programs. The WAC program director is the writing center director, and vice-versa. Those outside WAC

and writing centers often put the two together, and we might put them together for philosophical reasons and for convenience. The merger appears to be ideal. But there might be reasons not to put them together we have overlooked. We can argue that the programs work well together, and are critical for each other's success, as McLeod and Maimon suggest, but we can flip this argument on its head.

Michael Pemberton's article implicitly questions the monolithic approach of a combined WAC program and writing center. He points out the contradiction between many Writing in the Disciplines programs and the centralized writing center that, by definition, must provide generalist tutoring. Pemberton believes they can be reconciled, and he offers the two tutoring solutions for the center: the environmental and the cognitive roles. I, like Pemberton, am cautiously optimistic. I have seen the success and benefits of a combined program.

But, there may be two philosophical reasons *not* to merge the programs. First, by placing WAC in the writing center, we of course bring with it the WAC mission of helping faculty teach writing. And, along with that mission comes the authority associated with faculty in the institution, something many writing centers, as essentially places of student-advocacy, strive to avoid. The second problem, intertwined with the first, is that the writing center may become subsumed by the WAC program, again potentially undermining the student-centered stance most writing centers take. Let me elaborate.

In the case of the first problem, WAC in the center, the question of institutional authority rears its ugly head. John Trimbur questions the paradoxical nature of the name "peer tutor," and many centers have renamed their tutors consultants. Few deny there are authoritative issues in the writing center associated with tutoring, and most acknowledge that some of that authority comes from the institution; students are seeking help from an institutionally "authorized" locale.

Do we want to complicate the tutor-writer relationship more by bringing in the authority associated with the faculty of the WAC program? WAC programs are for faculty to develop better teaching techniques and assignments. Writing centers primarily serve students, are fierce student-adocates, and pride themselves on providing students with a safe environment, relatively free from the authoritarian position of the institution. By combining WAC with the writing center, we increase the authoritarian presence of the

institution in the writing center. More specifically, we increase the authoritarian presence of the faculty that students often want to avoid when seeking help. How often have we heard students complain about a faculty member or her assignment? Students may not sense the presence of WAC. In fact, I bet most students do not know what WAC is; they only know they write in a lot of classes, but philosophically, I question whether this is a merger a writing center wants to make.

The second problem, the problem of subsumption, is intertwined with the first problem of authority. Writing centers are funded to serve students, primarily those working on assignments for classes. The additional work we do is typically added to the primary mission of helping students become better writers through the vehicle of the texts they bring to us. Those texts are for assignments from classes, which are part of the WAC program, whether the faculty member who teaches them consulted with a WAC director or not. And this indirectly places the writing center in the service of the WAC program. Pemberton implies this submission in his article by proposing the aforementioned ways tutors can work with students. His suggested approaches work to compliment the WAC program. Couldn't we flip that on its head as well? Couldn't we say WAC programs should serve the writing centers because writing centers are the single place on campuses that deal directly with broadest demographic of students and their writing?

To conclude, I want to question whether we want our centers' missions to remain student-centered. Do we want our centers to be places for student-advocacy? Do we want to complicate the mission by serving faculty? Is it to our advantage to place the WAC program in the "last best place" on campus? Each campus has it's own site-specific concerns, and faculty and administrators must consider those when determining institutional placement of program. Dower as my warnings might sound, I do not want to force a separation or a merger. I simply want us to make informed decisions.

Thank you.